

***TESTIMONY BEFORE THE GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION
& ELECTIONS COMMITTEE***

February 18, 2009

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*HB 5903--AN ACT CONCERNING ABSENTEE VOTING FOR MEMBERS OF THE
ARMED FORCES STATIONED OVERSEAS.*

Good Morning Senator Slossberg, Representative Spallone, Senator McLachlan, Representative Hetherington and Honorable Members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee. My name is Justin Bernier and I am Executive Director of the Office of Military Affairs, which provided the committee with the language for this bill. I am also Chairman of the Connecticut Military and Defense Advisory Council. The council provides advice and recommendations to the state – at no cost – on matters affecting our service members, basing interests and defense industry. I appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony to you on HB 5903, “An Act Concerning Electronic Absentee Voting for Members of the Armed Forces Stationed Overseas.”

The Office of Military Affairs is an advocate for Connecticut’s service members and their families. Since 2007, I have had the opportunity to discuss quality of life issues with military personnel from across the state. When asked about their ability to participate in elections from overseas, our servicemen and women routinely cite obstacles that make it difficult – or near impossible – to exercise their voting rights. I believe we have the ability to address this problem within existing resources today.

A fact of life is that military personnel are deployed overseas during every election. Due to time and space constraints associated with the transit of paper election materials, military turnout for elections significantly lags behind civilian rates each year. Largely because the mail delivery time for Iraq and Afghanistan can be 24 to 36 days round-trip, the turnout rate for military personnel in war zones is especially low. (Having served overseas in Afghanistan, I can attest to the uncertainties of paper mail coming to and from a war zone.) I am particularly concerned about the ballot access of our Navy submariners, who routinely serve at sea for six-month periods or longer.

The Department of Defense has voiced similar concerns about the access of Connecticut's military personnel to the ballot box. The Federal Voting Assistance Program has recommended that Connecticut develop a process for the acceptance of electronic transmissions for all aspects of the balloting process. Using secure electronic transmissions instead of paper mail would significantly reduce the ballot transit time, almost certainly increasing voter turnout among our men and women in uniform. Some twenty states have already instituted such a process.

Nonprofit groups also support this innovative solution to the time-distance problem. In January 2009, the nonpartisan Pew Center on the States issued a comprehensive report on challenges facing America's overseas military voters. The Pew Center found that Connecticut is one of 16 states in which service members have insufficient time to vote. A major cause of this troubling grade is that Connecticut allows for neither the electronic transmission of blank ballots nor the electronic submission of completed ballots.

To fix this problem, the Office of Military Affairs proposes using a proven, secure process to enable military personnel and their families to register and vote electronically when deployed overseas and out of state. The proposal would require the Secretary of the State, in cooperation with the Elections Enforcement Commission and the Office of Military Affairs, to produce regulations for secure electronic voting by military and merchant marine personnel, and their spouses and dependents, when deployed out of state.

Importantly, for this budget environment, such a proposal would cost the state and its municipalities nothing. The Office of Military Affairs recently conducted a survey of states with an electronic voting system for deployed service members. In each case, the cost to the state was zero or nominal.

In closing, I would like to emphasize the importance of this initiative to Connecticut's service members. These men and women in uniform deserve nothing but our best efforts to ensure their access to the ballot box. I stand ready to assist this process in any additional way necessary.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I respectfully urge your support of HB-5903.